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Governing of Young People ‘at Risk’: The Alliance between Employability and Precariousness in EU Youth Policy Steering

Abstract

This article focuses on neoliberal governing by the European Union of cross-sectoral youth policies related to young people ‘at risk’ of social exclusion and marginalisation. The aim is to show how the alliance of discourses of employability and precariousness in these policies has emerged and is operated. In the article, European Council and European Commission policy documents from 2000 to 2016 have been analysed. The data were examined by using the idea of discourses and neoliberal governing by Foucault. Our results show that financial crisis and policy initiatives launched to mitigate its consequences made it possible to mainstream the neoliberal rationality of individual competition and flexibility as an inseparable part of youth policy steering.

Key words: EU policy, young people ‘at risk’, employability, precariousness, neoliberal political rationality, discourse, governing

Introduction

The global financial crisis that started in 2008 hit young people in Europe especially hard. During the recession that followed, at its peak in 2012, 23.3% of young people between 15 and 25 years of age were unemployed (Eurostat 2012). Of those young people, around 10% were neither in education, employment nor training (so called NEET young people) (Eurostat 2018). This low rate of youth employment became a major concern in the European Union (EU) (CEU 2008; CEU 2013; CEU

2014) and to tackle this ‘youth problem’, the EU governing bodies responded with multiple policy initiatives (for example, the Youth Guarantee). With the help of so called ‘soft’ governing methods introduced in the *Lisbon Strategy* (CEU 2000), these policy initiatives have been implemented in most EU member states (see COM 2016). Since these policy initiatives affect the vast majority of young people living in EU member states, their background assumptions and discourses need to be analysed.

In the EU governing bodies, young people, especially those living in rural areas, early school leavers, young women, ethnic minorities and immigrants, are often presented as being ‘at risk’ of social exclusion, unemployment or marginalisation, or as being vulnerable and precarious (author 3 & colleagues 2016, 2017; Colleague and Author 3 2015; COM 2012). To reduce that risk, EU policy has set an imperative to promote the so-called employability skills of young people, mainly referring to young people between 18-25 years of age (CEU 2013).

In this paper we ask how the alliance of discourses of employability and precariousness (especially of young people in labour market) has emerged and formed in European youth policy since the Lisbon Strategy, continuing after the apex of the crisis, and how this alliance is related to the neoliberal political rationality. This study is a part of three-year research project led by Author 3, in which we have analysed both European and Finnish policies and practices promoting young peoples’ inclusion, and where Author 1 is doing their Ph.D.

First, we outline how youth policy and governing young people has developed in EU policies since the *Lisbon Strategy*. Then we present our theoretical framework of governing with neoliberal rationality as operating through a double helix formed through the twinning of discourses of

employability and precariousness in youth policies. We apply this framework to our analysis and data and identify how these discourses emerge, develop, and increasingly meld seamlessly into the neoliberal political rationality in the three time periods we have based our analysis on: pre-recession, financial crisis, and post-recession eras. We find that after the financial crisis in 2008, discourses of employability and precariousness have been legitimated as an unquestioned basis in EU youth policy development. We further suggest that these discourses work together as a mutually reinforcing alliance that promotes a neoliberal, competing, self-managing, and self-investing individual to become the centre of youth policies, especially through different short-term education projects and skills training -programmes.

Youth policy developments in European Council and European Commission

In order to understand how youth policies are formed and implemented in the EU, we find it essential to separate so called ‘hard’ and ‘soft’ policy-making. The ‘hard policy’ or ‘hard law’, meaning transnational legislation that is implemented similarly throughout each member state through their respective state legislation, is written by the European Parliament that is constituted by elected citizens of each member state (PEU 2014). On the other hand, ‘soft’ law or ‘soft governing’ is executed through different governing bodies: the European Council and the European Commission. The European Council, consisting of the leaders of each member state, sets broader goals for the EU and the European Commission, comprised of members appointed by each member state, propose both ‘hard’ legislation to the European Parliament, and ‘soft’ governing by proposing policies through budgeting, communications, setting benchmarks, and policy recommendations. (Rasmussen 2014;

Lange and Alexiadou; PEU 2014). As Lange and Alexiadou (2007: 322-323) in their analysis about governing in EU's education policies describe:

“Soft law can be distinguished from hard law, the latter being the traditional form for exercising governmental powers. While hard law, such as EC and EU Treaty articles, directives and New Forms of European Union Governance regulations, creates legally binding obligations for member states and individuals, EU soft law, such as recommendations, opinions, reports, joint communications of the Commission and the Education Council, and action plans, is only persuasive. It does not create enforceable legal rights and obligations for EU institutions or citizens.”

In the EU, youth policies are executed and determined under this ‘soft governing’, mainly with a policy mechanism called the *Open Method of Coordination* (OMC). OMC was originally introduced in the Lisbon strategy in 2000 (CEU 2000) and is by definition a ‘soft governing’ system for promoting and executing goals set by both the EU Council and the Commission. OMC works through 1) Setting goals for member states 2) Creating reference tools to reach pre-defined benchmarks, 3) establishing ways to communicate and change experiences between member states 4) drawing conclusions about best practices, and 5) recommending future action based on previous information. (Rasmussen 2014; Alexiadou, Fink-Haffner and Lange 2010) The distinctive feature in the OMC is the promotion of deregulation and creating governing solutions through which private and non-governmental organisations are invited to take part in decision-making at a local level (Klatt 2014; Lange and Alexiadou 2008). In youth policy, this promotion can be seen in the ways in which the European Commission through the European Social Fund earmarks funds for different short term projects aimed at educating, training, guiding and rehabilitating young people in order to tackle issues

concerning them and their position in labour markets (COM 2013; ESF 2013; Author 3 et al 2016, Colleague and Author 3 2014).

When it comes to youth policies, the initial goals in the Lisbon strategy (2000) aimed at achieving full employment, and ensuring that EU citizens in general have appropriate competence in areas such as IT, multicultural and language skills, in order to be able to compete in globalising markets (CEU 2000; CEU 2001, CEU 2002, CEU 2003, see also Bessant and Watts 2014, Rasmussen 2014). A few years after the Lisbon strategy, due to declining economic growth in Europe from 2003 to 2005, young people started to gain increased attention in EU policy settings (Bessant and Watts 2014). After 2005, the European Council named ‘early school leaving’, ‘vulnerable young people’ and ‘social exclusion’ as its main policy areas (COM 2005; 2006; 2007; see also Ross and Leathwood 2013). Following the Council’s guidelines, the first *EU Youth Strategy* (COM 2007) was published in 2007, bringing forward issues like young people and their risk of social exclusion.

Although concerns about young people and their participation in society had already been raised, the global economic crisis of 2008 and the mass youth unemployment that followed increased that worry to previously-unforeseen levels. Measures and initiatives to tackle youth unemployment followed: most notably the European Commission and Council launched specific youth policies, such as the

*Youth Guarantee*¹ (CEU 2013; COM 2012; 2013) and *Youth Employment Initiative* (COM 2013; ESF 2013). Both of these initiatives were directed at addressing the consequences of the recession and mass youth unemployment and were implemented in EU member states through OMC, the open method of coordination (Lahusen, Schulz & Graziano 2012).

Lange and Alexiadou (2007) have argued that OMC gives legitimization to neoliberal ways of arranging government – that is arranging governing based on ideals of free competition, freedom of choice and deregulation. This is especially the case with areas that used to be the sole responsibility of individual nation-states, such as education, social policy and youth policy. (ibid) In our research project we have found that these policies and their implementation have led to the promotion and cultivation of neoliberal rationality and individuality, mainly through a range of short-term education and training projects and programmes (Author 1 and Author 3 2014; Author1 and Author 3 2018; Colleague, Author 1 and Author 3 *in review*; Author 3 et al 2017; 201). For example, in Author 1's previous research about the education of young people in prison, in short term education programmes,

¹ *Youth Guarantee is a recommendation by the European Commission for member states to guarantee a place in employment, education or training for young people under 25 years of age and who have been unemployed for at least four months. (COM 2012; CEU 2013.) The Youth Employment Initiative is a way to earmark the European Social Fund's funding to projects and programmes in which young people can find suitable work places, find education and acquire skills seen essential to their future employability (ESF 2013; COM 2013)*

neoliberal rationality is manifested in the promotion of both employability and self-management and self-control as a form of ideal inclusion to society (Author 1 and Author 3 2018).

Youth policies and their implementation through OMC, which we have termed *youth policy steering*, could be understood as expressions of an ingrained neoliberal governing, through which market-oriented individual competition and development of the competence to function as an economically productive member of society work together as defining logics (Ball 2016, 2013b; Moos 2009). Rasmussen (2014) noted that *The Lisbon Strategy* and OMC set a significant precedent in aligning education with employment and economic policies, and they thereby changed the role of the EU's governing of education, social, and employment policies in member states.

Youth policy as risk-management in neoliberal political rationality

Our study of EU youth policy steering and its key discourses draws on Bacchi and Bonham (2014) who, following Foucault's thinking, define discourse as sets of practices of that constructs knowledge:

"In Foucault the term "discourse" refers to knowledge, [...] The term "discursive practice/s" describes those practices of knowledge formation by focusing on how specific knowledges ("discourses") operate and the work they do. (ibid. 2014, 174)."

In the context of policy making and especially policy texts, we have defined discourses as a setting of different practises of language that make certain truths possible (Ikävalko 2016, 67-68, see also Author 3 et al 2016). We understand discourses as being tied to systems of power, as a phrase of language that is produced and repeated so as to become taken-for-granted. Discourses can be named and identified as a collection of phrases that are seemingly neutral and objective, but that are rooted in specific rationalities that affect the ways in which policies are arranged (Foucault 2010, Ball 2013a, Author 3 et al 2016). In the context of youth policies, our interest is in discourses that are given this

position of neutrality, self-evidence and unquestionability – or to rephrase, discourses that have become hegemonic (see for Foucault 1981, Ikävalko 2016; Author 3 et al 2016; Author 1 and Author 3 2018).

We have drawn on Foucault's (2010; 1982) notion of governing as producing discourses of seemingly self-evident and natural, and thus desirable states of being, and producing imperatives and technologies to encourage individuals to strive and conduct themselves towards these self-evident 'truths' (Foucault 1982, Dean 1999, Rose 1999.) In the youth policy context, our interest lies in the political rationalities that inform and guide policy making, and following Brown (2015), we argue that policy steering is informed and conducted through *neoliberal political rationality*. This political rationality can be traced, we argue, by identifying how certain discourses emerge in policies and become entwined to both policies and practises aimed to reduce risks, such as youth unemployment.

Under neoliberalist political rationality, the role of policy and governing in general has shifted from legislation towards providing opportunities for markets and economic principles to operate (Brown 2015). From this point of view, young people are seen as a flexible resource that can be both invested in and made self-responsible for their opportunities in the markets of life (Ball 2013a; 2016, Brown 2015, Author 3 et al 2017). Brown (2015, p 35; 116-118) claims that neoliberalism as a rationality has changed the core of policy making from traditional political platforms to 'soft' policy making through best practices, benchmarking and cooperation. In youth policies, this turn to 'soft' policy and 'soft' governing is evident in its execution and implementation through OMC (see for Lange and Alexiadou 2014.) In other words, neoliberal governing in youth policies has led to a situation in which previously political issues, such as social welfare, employment and education, are constantly de-

politicizing, and where decision making relies on seemingly neutral and measurable economic reasoning, benchmarking and best practices (Author 3 et al 2017; see also Brown 2015; Oksala 2013).

As a market-oriented political rationality, neoliberalism and neoliberalist policy focuses increasingly on identifying, measuring and defining risks that are seen as harmful to society and its functions (Brown 2015, see also Beck 1992). The member states are activated in order to solve the problems of welfare politics (or the lack of them) with market-oriented project-based interventions that set a particular governing context for young people identified to be ‘at risk’ of multiple harms, such as unemployment, social exclusion, marginalisation and discrimination (e.g. Author 3 2010, 2012). In this sense, the ‘at risk’ discourse is an example of a phrase that is produced, repeated and becomes a taken-for-granted truth, largely unquestioned, and embedded in particular policy aims.

We understand the EU’s youth policies to be illustrative of the wider context of neoliberal political rationality, and we traced a particular contribution to this rationality in the discursive construction of the youth problem and treatment of youth unemployment. The risk of youth unemployment and marginalisation in current EU policies is individualised rather than tied to broader systemic issues—in policy discourses unemployed status is presented as a lifestyle choice—and in policy responses, different individual-targeting programmes and guarantees are put forward (Foster and Spencer 2010; Standing 2011; see also COM 2013; 2016). This has been described as a shift in education, employment and social policies from providing employment opportunities, to ‘breaking the habit of worklessness’ or even ‘addiction to social benefits’ (Standing 2011: 168). One way this opportunity-providing works in the EU youth policy steering is through a twinning of the discourses of employability and precariousness.

Discourses of employability and precariousness in youth policies

In our research project we have identified employability as a hegemonic discourse evident in the EU's education and social policies and key to accessing the labour market and addressing social exclusion (e.g. Author 1 and Author 3; Author 3 et al 2017; Colleagues and Author 3 2018; Author 3 and colleague 2016, see also Fejes 2010). Although employability has multiple definitions, in policy steering and beyond it has been defined in a narrow sense— either as different skill-sets, characteristics or qualifications enabling movement within and into labour markets, or as an individual quality or character of being employable (e.g. McQuaid & Lindsay 2005; Fejes 2010; Belt & Richardson 2005; Brown, Hesketh & Williams 2013; Author 3 and colleague 2014). Employability is constructed through a focus on what is assumed to be lacking in terms of skills and policies for today's knowledge-based or post-industrial societies. These include flexibility, adaptability, and willingness to develop and educate oneself constantly (Ball 2013; Dahlstedt, Fejes and Schonning 2011; McQuaid and Lindsey; Worth 2003).

While the discourse of 'employability' presents as a neutral positive response to social issues by equipping young people with necessary skills, the assumed meeting of a perceived deficit on the part of individuals diverts attention away from the wider context in which individuals are seeking employment. Consequently, enhancing these skills is ultimately determined to be an individual responsibility and necessity in order to 'survive' broad competitive and uncertain labour markets (Author 3 and colleague 2016; Author 1 and Author 2 2018). What Worth refers to as "individual-focused, supply-side orthodoxy" (Worth, 2003, 619; see also Author 3 and colleague 2016), permeated by the ethic of adaptability and self-management is particularly well expressed in a range

of policies targeted to young people. In youth and education policies, employability is often presented as a one-size-fits-all solution to multiple social issues as a flexible and mutating concept that can be used to legitimise a particular configuration of political responses at a range of governance levels (Crisp and Powell 2016,18-19). Although employability emphasises individualism and personal development, and despite a lack of attention to particular contexts of individuals' lived lives, ironically there is a strong link to community by promoting social cohesion through employment and social participation (see for Fejes 2010). In its policy use, increasing individuals' employability is introduced as a solution to a range of social problems, including unemployment, social exclusion and marginalization, and understood this way it works as a tool for forging social cohesion (McQuaid and Lindsay 2005; Author 1 and Author 3 2017).

It is also interesting and important to analyse how employability is related to and intertwined with the concept of precariousness. The precariousness of work life and precarious ways of existing are described in the literature about the concept and the use of 'precariat' to mean "connected insecure, volatile or vulnerable human situations that are socioeconomically linked to the labour market dynamics" (della Porta, Hänninen, Siisiäinen and Silvasti 2015: 1; Kurki et al 2016). Precariousness itself is not a new concept, but its use has intensified after the global financial crisis in 2008 when the number of people living with insecure employment is increasing on a global scale (Doherty 2017; della Porta et. Al 2015; Standing 2011; Kurki and Author 3 2014; Kurki et al 2016).

Young people in the workforce have always been seen as being in a somewhat precarious situation, and a certain amount of uncertainty is usually thought to be a 'natural phase' in young peoples' lives (Foster and Spencer 2011; Melin and Blom 2015:34). However, at the EU policy level, the discourse

of precariousness has emerged recently as young people are seemingly facing an even more insecure labour market after the financial crises (Solheim and Leiulsfrud 2015). The discourse about the increasing precariousness of work especially for young people appears to be set as an accepted precondition in employment, education and social policies (see Dörre 2015; Colleague and Author 3 2014). Lorey (2011) suggests that precariousness is no longer perceived as a phenomenon of ‘exception’, but instead is in the midst of a process of normalisation, especially in western societies.

Drawing on research conducted on the European Labour Force Survey data, Doogan (2015) has offered an analysis of the historical development and contradictions of precariousness in the European context. He argues that precariousness is often used as concept in both political and analytical contexts in contradictory ways – as a way to either describe individual experiences or larger systemic mechanisms. He suggests that precariousness should be seen not necessarily as an individual experience, but as a concept that explores wider societal changes and the transformation of work in post-recession world. Therefore, it is problematic that the discourse of precariousness emerges as part of a wider set of governing discourses linking with ‘at risk’, ‘vulnerability’, and ‘employability’ to reduce youth issues to individual traits and skills. It is necessary to consider the extent to which precariousness and other categorisations related to young people illustrate an increasing economic imperative that encourages individualistic and reductive approaches to youth problems, thus reinforcing a neoliberal political rationality of addressing youth issues and youth as an issue.

Data and analysis

This research is a part of an on-going three-year project (name anonymized) led by Author 3, and through which Author 1 is undertaking their Ph. D research. It asks what national and international youth policies and practices are targeted at young people who are ‘at risk’ of social exclusion and marginalisation. In the project we ask how youth support policies and practices shape the interests of young people who are considered ‘at risk’ or vulnerable. Our work has traced how neoliberal rationality has framed support systems for young people from various backgrounds and how the ideal subjectivity constructed by these support systems has been a rather complex one, combining contradictory ideals (e.g. Author 3 and Colleague 2014; Author 3 et al 2016; Author1 & Author 3 2017).

In this study we focus on 1) identifying the discourses that are evident in the EU policy steering, 2) tracing how these discourses construct a particular truth about young people, and 3) detecting how they start to be taken for granted and ultimately hegemonic in current policy as part of an encompassing neoliberal political rationality. In seeking to identify how discourses emerge and develop salience, we can then interrogate their neutrality in order to point to the constraints they place on what is possible for young people and what the norms and ideals are towards which young people are being directed.

Following Foucault (1965/1977) our starting point in this research is to look for points at which the discourses seem to be so self-evident that they are almost unquestionable. We are not aiming to ‘find the real narrative’ or present changes in policy discourses analysed as part of certain pre-destined development or grand story (see for Carabine 2001; Foucault 2010). Rather, we look at where and

when discourses of precariousness and employability emerge in European youth policies and what openings and consequences those discourses seem to make in present day youth policy steering.

To trace the discourses of precariousness and employability, we analysed documents from both the European Council and the European Commission. We chose not to include documents from the European Parliament in our data, because youth policies in the EU are mainly executed through soft governing, not through transnational ‘hard’ legislation (Rasmussen 2013). While the number of documents analysed in this study was vast (see Table 1), special focus was given to documents concerning *Youth Guarantee* and *Youth reports* and the related staff working documents, since they are mentioned as having the most influence in execution and implementation of youth policies (see for CEU 2012; COM 2013; COM 2016).

We started our analysis by defining with our previous research, the literature, and policy documents which discourses seemed hegemonic in most recent documents (in 2015 and 2016). Then, we continued our analysis by tracing the ways in which discourses of precariousness and employability emerged after The Lisbon Strategy and started to map how they intertwine and work together. We limited the range of the documents from the most current back to those from the Lisbon strategy, because based on the literature presented previously, the Lisbon strategy marked a change in the process of decision making in the EU and thus is a good starting point for considering which discourses have changed or been reinforced through a decade and a half of economic and social change. Finally, we considered how the emergence of these discourses changed and affected the ways in which youth policy steering was legitimised in documents. Table 1 shows the documents we used

in our analysis and Table 2 presents the main concerns and solutions in youth policies and the most notable solutions to them in the pre-recession, recession and post-recession eras.

European Commission Communications(COM) and Staff Working Documents (SWD):	Year
Memorandum of Lifelong Learning	2000
Making a European Area of Lifelong Learning a Reality	2001
Resolution on Lifelong Learning	2002
Investing Efficiently in Education and Training	2003
Follow-up to the White Paper on a New Ipetus for European Youth: evaluation of activities conducted in the framework of European cooperation in the youth field	2004
Promoting young people's full participation in education, employment and society	2007
An EU Strategy for Youth: Investing and Empowering - A renewed open method of coordination to address youth challenges and opportunities	2007
The council Conclusions on Adult Learning	2008
Strategic Framework fo European Cooperation in Education and Training (ET2020)	2009
Youth, Investing and Empowering	2009
Social Dimention of education and training	2010
Agenda for New Skills and Jobs: European Contribution Towards Full Employment	2010
Youth Opportunities Initiative	2011
Education and Training in a smart, sustainable and inclusive Europe	2011
Resolution on a Renewed European Agenda for Adult Learning	2011
2012 EU Youth Report	2012
Results of the first cycle of the Open Method of Coordination in the youth field	2012
Joint report of the Council and the Commission on the implementation of the renewed framework for European Cooperation in the youth field (EU Youth Strategy 2010-2018)	2012
Rethinking Education: Investing in skills for better socio-economic outcomes	2012
Recommendation for Establishing a Youth Guarantee	2012
Status of the situation of young people in the European Union	2012
Practical support for the design and implementation of Youth Guarantee schemes	2013
Working together for Europe's Young People	2013
Youth Employment Initiative	2013
EU measures to tackle youth unemployment	2013
Evaluation Toolkit for Youth Guarantee Projects	2014
The Youth Guarantee - an essential investment for the future	2014
Frequently Asked Questions about the Youth Guarantee	2014
The Youth Guarantee - Making it Happen	2014
Memo: The EU Youth Guarantee	2014
Joint report of the Council and the Commission on the implementation of the renewed framework for European Cooperation in the youth field (EU Youth Strategy 2010-2018)	2015
EU youth Report	2015
No time for business as usual	2015
The Youth Guarantee and Youth Employmen Initiative three years on	2016
Investing in Europe's Youth	2016
New Skills Agenda for Europe. Working together to strengthen human capital, employability and competetiveness	2016
European Council (CEU)	
Council presidency conclusions 2000-2016	2000-2016
Council Recommendation for Establishing a Youth Guarantee	2013

Table 1- European Commission and European Council Documents used in Analysis

The alliance between employability and precariousness in European youth policy

In our analysis, we were able to define three periods in EU Youth policy discourses starting from the Lisbon treaty in 2000: the pre-recession, financial crisis, and post-recession eras. In the pre-recession era (2000-2007), youth policies were discussed by the European Council and Commission through changes in the European governing system itself. The goal for the European Union area in the documents was full employment for everyone, and youth-related policies focused mainly on enhancing lifelong learning skills and reducing early school leaving. During the financial crisis (2008-2013), the focus of EU policy was mainly on reducing mass youth unemployment—the consequence of financial crisis. Finally, by the post-recession era (2014-2016), the focus of youth policy was still on reducing youth unemployment, but also increasingly on finding the young people

Years	Main concerns and aims of youth policy	Policy initiatives, recommendations and practises
2000-2007	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Modernising welfare systems to answer challenges of the 'new era' knowledge-based society through fixing skills gap, especially with young and elderly people - Goal of employment policies is full employment - Goals to build active knowledge society, where citizens are committed to lifelong learning - Worry about skills gap, especially in ITC-skills - Raising employability and strengthening of social cohesion becomes a priority, education and training has a key role in reducing social exclusion 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Introduction of Open Method of Coordination - Call for corporate responsibility in fight to decrease social problems - Programmes and initiatives to increase lifelong learning - Youth strategy - Programmes to enhance lifelong learning and to reduce early school leaving - First ideas of Youth Guarantee as it is currently known are introduced
2008-2013	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Beginning of financial crisis and recession due to global market drop - Increasing role of education in reducing youth unemployment, reducing early school leaving - Identifying the most vulnerable people and new risks of exclusion - Mitigation of the effect of the financial crisis - Need to enhance employment in order to stabilize economy - Unemployment, especially youth unemployment named as one of the biggest threats in EU 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Rapid additional action by ESF to support employment especially for vulnerable groups - Quantification of education and poverty indicators - Encouragement of partnership between education, business and research - Recommendation on establishing Youth Guarantee - Youth Employment Initiative is introduced - Call to increase competition in order to boost economy
2014-2016	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Economy starts to recover, but recovery is yet 'fragile' - Youth unemployment is not reducing alongside with economic recovery - 'Migration crisis' - Brexit 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Youth Guarantee and Youth Employment Initiative are implemented - Calls to increase cooperation between youth work, NGO's and private sector - Call for continuation of Youth Guarantee and Youth Employment Initiative

Table 2 – Youth policy concerns and measures 2000-2016

seen as 'the most vulnerable' and focusing on special and specific measures for them. Throughout these three stages, we found that in the documents analysed, the discourses of young peoples' employability and precariousness surfaced and changed hand in hand with wider economic and societal developments that occurred during each defined period.

Pre-recession era – finding success for all Europeans

In *the Lisbon Strategy*, full employment throughout the EU and becoming the most competitive economy globally were the main goals. This was described through the importance of information technology and related skills as essential parts of employability, and so-called info-exclusion, exclusion from the internet and network technology, was seen as a perilous risk. This is evident in several declaration points in the Lisbon strategy:

25. *Europe's education and training systems need to adapt both to the demands of the knowledge society and to the need for an improved level and quality of employment. **They will have to offer learning and training opportunities tailored to target groups at different stages of their lives: young people, unemployed adults and those in employment who are at risk of seeing their skills overtaken by rapid change.** (COE 2000, the Lisbon Strategy, Authors' emphasis)*

Understanding and emphasizing structural changes in the global economy, or as it was put in the excerpt above, 'the demands of the knowledge society' was responded to with a call for individualized and targeted education programs. Young people are mentioned, but only as a one group among others seen as being at risk of not getting the most from the promises of the new technology. In the context of this change in global economy, the European Council presented filling skill-gaps as being among the EU's goals for coming years:

"- improving employability and reducing skills gaps, in particular by providing employment services with a Europe-wide data base on jobs and learning opportunities; promoting special programmes to enable unemployed people to fill skill gaps;

*[...]Progress towards these goals should be **benchmarked** (COE 2000, the Lisbon Strategy, Authors' emphasis)*

###Here employability and strengthening employability are mentioned as key focus areas, and employability is tied to promoting specific skills (such as IT and language skills), is mentioned frequently in the document. Also, as can be seen in the quote, benchmarking is suggested as a way to promote these goals of skills training and increasing employability. As suggested by Brown (2015), neoliberal political rationality works in political decision-making through mechanisms like benchmarking and best practice – governing practice more familiar from the economic and business world. We also interpreted this as bringing employment policies under the umbrella of neoliberal rationality.

During 2004, due to the slowing of economic growth the European Council started to name early school leaving, vulnerable young people and social exclusion as major policy areas (CEU 2004, see also). Following this line of policy action, the European Commission published its first *European Youth Strategy* (COM 2007, EU Youth strategy), in which young people's social exclusion started to be connected more tightly to the social costs of that exclusion. The main focus was on specific outliers from general healthy trends: young people experiencing unemployment and poverty and special attention was given to skills of young peoples' employability:

*“Education is crucial for young people's transitions into labour market and successful integration and participation in society. However the **significant number of young people leaves education systems without having acquired the skills needed for a smooth transition into employment.** (COM 2007:3, EU Youth strategy, Authors' emphasis)*

Youth strategy here continues producing a strong employability discourse that is also evident in other documents – that employability is tied to the skills of people and as something that could be increased through skills training. It is also evidence of tying the economy to education policy. At the same time, young people and their '*successful integration*' into society is tied to the success of labour markets and employment. Worry, especially about certain groups of young people and their future participation, becomes evident:

*“While overall conditions for young people in Europe today are positive –freedom and security, prosperity, longer life expectancy – **there is increasing concern that many of them cannot prosper.** High rates of child poverty, poor health, school drop-out and unemployment among a too large number of young people, indicate **a need to review the investments Europe is making in its youth** starting earlier, also taking into account the essential role of families. **Social exclusion of young people carries high social costs and needs to be prevented**” (COM 2007:2, EU Youth Strategy, Authors' emphasis)*

Although it is emphasised that most young people in Europe are doing well and prospering, the social exclusion of some is a concern. The risk of social exclusion of young people is seen as being more prevalent in groups that are seen as being especially vulnerable—young people living in poverty, in

rural areas, with disabilities, with an immigrant background or with high probability of being discriminated against (COM 2007). A call for a '*review of investments*' in young people has been made, and '*high social costs*' due to the social exclusion of young people are mentioned as its legitimisation.

In the pre-recession era, youth policy showed signs of increasingly being tied more closely to neoliberal rationality. Young people identified as being 'at risk' were brought closer to the centre of youth policies, and their integration and membership in society was tied to their stance in labour markets. Employability as a discourse was targeting and producing opportunities to tackle unemployment with no specific focus on young people *per se*, but in youth policies, increasing employability of disadvantaged young people was a policy target to bring these outliers in to line with the position with vast majority.

Economic crisis and emergence of precariousness as a 'quality' of young people

After the global economic crisis in 2008, there was a shift in emphasis in youth policies, in which demands for education to focus increasingly on the employability of young people as a group became common. Our analysis found that along with the strengthening of the employability discourse in youth policy, there was a move away from including outliers in a positive labour environment to a more global idea of the precarious situation of young people.

In their responses to the mass youth unemployment, the European Commission emphasised increasing young peoples' social inclusion through various measures and initiatives. For example, the

Commission's communication *Results of the first cycle of the Open Method of Coordination in the youth field* (2012) describes problems and actions concerning young peoples' situation as following:

*"The EU Youth Strategy contributed to these efforts by making **youth employment the overall thematic priority** during the first Trio Presidency. This resulted in **recommendations and proposals for action** through Council resolutions addressing the **social inclusion of young people, and the role of youth work in employability and accessing jobs** (SWD 2012, *Results of the first cycle of the Open Method of Coordination in the youth field*; Authors' emphasis)"*

In the document, it is stated that tackling mass youth unemployment has been named as a priority in European policies. The policies, formed and executed through OMC (Open Method of Coordination, see p. 4 of this article) in the form of '*recommendations and proposals for action*' targets young people in order to promote their inclusion through employment. When talking about employability, both skills and overall access to jobs are mentioned. This we interpret as transformation of the employability discourse, to target not only specific young people but all of them. Similar interpretations can also be made in the Commission's proposal for establishing the Youth Guarantee:

*'Young people **struggle to find a foothold** on the labour market. These difficulties have been amplified during the current crises, with young people often **being the first fired and last hired** in such economic circumstances.'* (SWD 2012, *Proposal for a Council Recommendation on Establishing a Youth Guarantee*, 2, Authors' emphasis)

In the above extract, as in many others (see for example CEU 2013: p. 2, 4-5; COM 2013: p. 2-5, 11-12), the risk of being left out of employment seems to ring true to all young people. We interpret this *being the first fired and last hired* description about young people as the emerging discourse of young peoples' increased precariousness in the labour market that is starting to get more of a foothold in youth policy. The strengthening of this discourse can also be seen in the Council's final recommendation for the Youth Guarantee, in which young people and their situation in the midst of crisis are described as follows:

*Young people have been hit particularly hard during the crisis. They are **vulnerable** because of the transitional life periods they are going through, their lack of professional experience, their **sometimes inadequate education or training**, their often limited social protection coverage, restricted access to financial resources, and **precarious work conditions**. [...] Furthermore, some young people are at **a particular disadvantage or at risk of discrimination**. Appropriate supportive measures are therefore required, **whilst recognising young people's individual responsibility** in finding a route into economic activity. (CEU 2013: 2, Councils Recommendation on Establishing a Youth Guarantee, Authors' emphasis)*

Following the recognition of the range of difficult situations young people face, where precarious work conditions are mentioned as one such situation, the Council also speaks directly to societal differences and inequalities that might affect a person's access to employment. Despite gesturing at structural and societal issues, individual responsibility in '*finding a route into economic activity*' is the underlying policy focus. Precarious employment and life situation are no longer an exception that concerns only the few, but is rather a crisis condition to be faced by all young people, one that could be reduced by offering support to individuals to take responsible action.

Although precarious conditions seem to apply to young people as a group, the discourse recognises different 'levels' of vulnerability and risk, as can also be seen in following exert:

*"Yet others, often more disadvantaged young people (such as those with low skills of other barriers), will **need deeper, longer and more complex interventions** and the use of tangible offers in order to ensure that they too benefit from the Youth Guarantee." (COM 2012: 2, Commission proposal for establishing Youth Guarantee, Authors' emphasis)*

In the Commission's proposal, longer and more complex interventions are set in a context of risk measurement. By acknowledging that certain groups may need more '*deep, longer, and complex*' interventions, it is also acknowledged that the Youth Guarantee itself favours normative youth

citizens. This we have analysed as an attachment of discourses of precariousness to the neoliberal political rationality in a way that seeks to define and measure risks as thoroughly as possible (see also Brown 2016). This ‘risk assessment’ has started to appear in policy in more and more detail, which ultimately gives legitimisation for more control and governing of young people seen as the ‘most precarious’ or ‘most vulnerable’ (see Author 1 and Author 3; Author 3 et al 2017; Brown 2016; Fejes 2010; Standing 2012; B).

Our analysis found that when talking about employability and young people, the focus and goal of enhancing skills was no longer focused on gaining entry to labour markets, but the policy also sought to ‘boost the confidence’ of young people and thus increase their belief in their future prospects in otherwise risky conditions:

*‘Essential reforms must therefore be flanked by fast-acting measures to boost growth and to help young people find jobs and acquire essential skills. **These measures will boost confidence** and show young people that they have a bright future.’ (COM 2013:2, A call to action on youth unemployment. Authors’ emphasis)*

Fast reforms are seen as being essential for increasing employability and skills. More notably, they are attached here to young peoples’ confidence and future hopes – or as we have interpreted it, their own investment to their personal essential skills to survive and thrive. We suggest that during the financial crisis and its aftermath, more attention was afforded to an individualized neoliberal rationality embedded in pre-recession era EU governance. In this sense, by following how youth issues have been constructed through the different eras, the reformulation of discourses reinforced a neoliberal rationality: employability discourses shifted from promoting specific skills for employment to promoting individuals’ personal qualities and self-investment in the form of training. Similarly, the discourse of precariousness of young people emerged as a response to the immediate

effects of the financial crisis and following recession. Yet, precariousness was seen still a crisis-induced, temporary state, not a prevalent condition of young people.

Post-recession – Normalising precariousness of young people

The aftermath of crisis and slow but steady economic growth after 2013 reduced overall unemployment rates throughout the EU, but youth unemployment remained still higher than before the increase in 2008 (EUROSTAT 2017). As we noted in earlier, *Youth Guarantee (COM 2013)* had taken notice of those seen as the ‘most vulnerable’, but the focus of the guarantee and youth policy was still on all young people. In the Commission report “*Youth Guarantee: Three years on*” (2016) the situation of young people has been described as being better than it was after the youth unemployment peak in 2013, but the situation is not yet too hopeful. Although the worst peak of financial crisis seemed to be over, the measures still aim to decrease further the number of young people in unemployment, or ‘at risk’:

*“Despite this significant decrease, the youth unemployment rate remains high in the EU and masks big differences between countries. This Communication – and accompanying Staff Working Documents - therefore outlines **further action to be taken to continue reducing youth unemployment.**” (COM 2016: Youth guarantee: Three years on, Authors’ emphasis)*

In the youth guarantees follow-up report it is noted that youth unemployment is not declining with the pace of the overall economic situation. Accordingly, a major focus of youth policies continues to be offering different measures and programmes targeting all young people. Special consideration should be given to differences between different member states, which in our analysis works as a legitimization of more careful recognition and measurement of those in most difficult situations. In

policy documents, there are calls to increase measures to find and recognise these so-called NEET (Not in Employment, Education or Training) young people:

*“Despite these positive developments, more effort is needed to **support those young people who are furthest away from the labour market**, i.e. the NEETs who have traditionally been hardest to reach out to (even before the crisis) and have benefited the least from improvements to date. This is the case in particular for those **facing poverty, social exclusion, disability and discrimination, including those belonging to an ethnic minority or with a migrant background, asylum-seekers and refugees**” (SWD 2016: 11, Youth guarantee three years on, Authors’ emphasis)*

In addition to the perceived precariousness faced by all young people, in the report, different historically marginalised and precarious groups have again been pulled towards the centre in youth policy steering. It is recognised that measures targeted at young people as an age cohort have not been beneficial to these identified as being in an especially risky situation who in previous policies were seen as being in need of more attention but were ultimately able to achieve the same as all youth. Also, the division between well-faring young people and those with fewer opportunities and skills and its widening has been noticed:

*“The gap is widening between young people who study, **are confident of finding a job** and engage in social, civic and cultural life, on the one hand, and those **with little hope of leading a fulfilling life** and who are at risk of exclusion and marginalisation, on the other hand.” (COM 2015:4; Youth report follow-up).*

In one sense, the interpretation of some of the youth policy seems to have moved back towards the ways in which it was executed in the pre-recessions era – to focus on unemployed young people and developing different employability and life management skills to mitigate the effects of their precariousness in labour markets. Yet, the ideas about all young people being in inherently precarious life circumstances stays and seems to have gained prevalence that was not visible in the youth policy discourses of previous eras. For example, in the Youth report follow-up, young people and their situation in labour markets and in society is described as following:

*“Jobs are crucial but **not always enough to ensure full inclusion**. Education and training can provide young people with **skills needed in the labour market** and help overcome inequalities and promote upward social mobility. The urgent challenge for education and training across the EU is **to invest and modernise quickly enough to realise this potential**. Youth policy, operating outside the classroom, can also help young people **acquire the right mix of skills to prepare them for life and work**.” (SWD 2015: 14-15, Youth report follow-up, Authors’ emphasis)*

The youth policy is here introduced as an entity of its own, outside policy on education and economics – but yet there is a call for education and training for employability skills that young people lack. While this was evident previously, here education features even more strongly, and it is education as training and deployment of skills as opposed to education for understanding and negotiating ongoing systemic barriers to employment and life fulfilment more broadly. By declaring that ‘jobs are crucial but not always enough’ in terms of full membership in society, young people in these discourses are placed in permanent ‘limbo’, where constant increases to individual employability skills through training are needed (see also Kurki et al 2014; Author 3 2014; 2012). Rather than re-examining the basis of the employability discourses or the specific structural issues that constrain youth in seeking secure employment, precariousness seems to become the permanent condition for young people, and perpetual skills training the answer. This inherent precariousness thus leads to a situation in which more investments to ‘realise the potential’ of young people in the form of the ‘right mix of skills’ (see also Masoud et al. *in press*). In our analysis of youth policy discourses, it seems that the ideas about young peoples’ inherent precariousness are ‘stuck’ to the policy discourses in the sense that the taken-for-granted truth that youth is ‘at risk’ and vulnerable to ‘precarity’ does not change even if things improve more broadly.

Conclusion

In an era marked by an increasing normalisation of neoliberal political rationality, policies are built around the avoidance of risk which can be managed through sets of practices. In the administration of European youth policy, these practices include policy initiatives for gaining skills and avoiding irresponsible or risky behaviour. The life situations of young people are often ascribed by categorical thinking as being inherently and perpetually ‘at risk’, despite not having a clear sense of what those risks are, how risks are linked to wider systemic issues, or how those risks themselves should be addressed. We see a danger that this risk is reduced in policy to a problem of individuals whereby they are considered to be perpetually deficient in certain pre-determined specific skills and knowledge sets. In turn, rather than articulating how to mitigate systemic and structural unemployment, policies are directed at solving individual youths’ unemployment, and ultimately at building their own sense of commitment to building perpetual individual skill assets

At the same time, the ideas about young peoples’ precarious position in labour markets is currently presented as being self-evident and a ‘natural’ way to exist. In EU youth policy, discourses of employability and precariousness seem to form a ‘double helix’, or in other words they work in alliance as a mutually reinforcing discourses promoting and constructing neoliberal rationality in. By this we mean that discourses of employability seem to work from the assumption that young peoples’ labour market options are precarious. This, in turn, means that individuals’ employability must be enhanced in order to mitigate the risk of unemployment and future precariousness. In EU policy settings, this produces the assumption that young people with different skills for employment are constantly competing in scarce labour markets and thus for individuals to manage and cope with their

employability skills must be constantly enhanced, measured and evaluated. As a result, in the state of constant competition individuals' situations grow more uncertain and even more precarious. Discourses of precariousness and employability construct 'at risk' as a constant condition for all young people; preparing oneself to survive precarious conditions is seen as a requirement for a productive life.

Through the alliance of employability and precariousness, we have shown how the EU policy steering as a form of governing works by producing and legitimating the ideal, and thus, the preoccupied neoliberal rationality of the market-oriented order. As we have shown in our earlier work in the project, the form of governing does not turn targeted young people into passive objects. Rather, governing cannot work unless the targets are capable of being met and unless it offers compelling forms of agency provided in the form of an employability discourse: skills, self-management, independence and freedom (see for Rose 1999; Author 3 2012). Also, this promise of individual success by cultivating the right set of skills is also how young people end up circulating in various types of support systems—it works as a cruel promise that seldom leads to desired outcomes (see Kurki et al 2014; Author 3 et al 2016, Masoud et al *in press*). Thus, we claim that is essential to understand that policy aimed at promoting the situation of young people in a context of economic precariousness is not neutral or objective but is tied to ideals of neoliberal rationality.

We would also suggest that based on the analysis we have shown in this paper, the financial crisis and its aftermath provided an opportunity to introduce neoliberal political rationality about competition, individual responsibility for one's future and the need to develop oneself constantly through emergence and hegemonisation of discourses of young people 'at risk', employability, and

the precariousness of labour markets. A significant implication of this trend is that systemic issues including poverty and discrimination arise as extra deficits that individual skill-development and vague 'investment in human capital' can solve rather than as areas for direct policy imperatives.

However, it is important to note that although discourses of employability and precariousness seem to be self-evident and unquestionable in EU youth policy steering, the policy context does not exclude the existence of other discourses concerning young people. In this study, we have not considered the implementation of these discourses on national practices at the grass roots level. We would suggest that further research should look more closely into the specific ways that these policies are realised at the national level. Our findings suggest the need for further examination of how these discourses work in local contexts.

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Author 1's Master's thesis and 4 articles have been removed from the reference list

Author 3's 7 articles have been removed from the reference list

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